

Why Does My Child Hurt Themselves?

Helping Children with an Intellectual Disability and Autism manage their Self-Injurious Behaviour

WHAT IS SELF-INJURY?

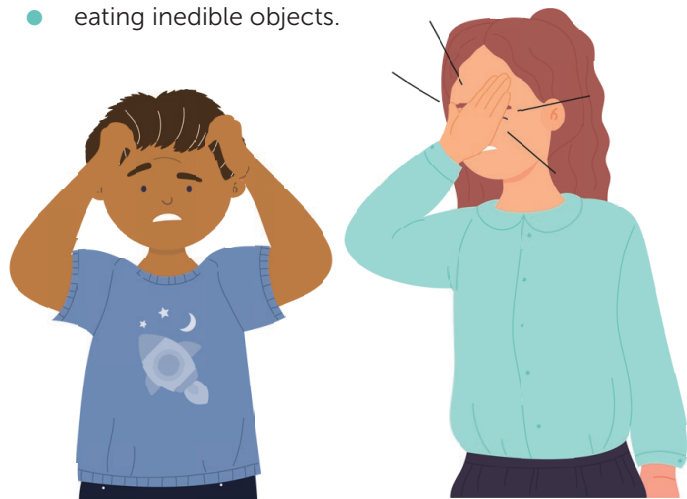
Self-injurious behaviour is when a person hurts themselves on purpose. Children might hurt themselves when they feel stressed or when they are trying to communicate a message.

Sometimes, self-injurious behaviours start as repetitive behaviour used by the child to make themselves feel better (to soothe, calm down, or stay alert). The child can learn that these behaviours are useful for getting their needs met, because people respond to the behaviour.

WHAT DOES SELF-INJURY LOOK LIKE?

Self-injurious behaviours include:

- biting themselves, e.g. biting hands or forearms
- hitting their own body with hands or fists, e.g. slapping their face, hitting their temple with a closed fist
- hitting their own body with an object
- hitting their own body against an object, e.g. banging their head on the floor or wall
- scratching, skin picking or pinching
- hair-pulling
- eye poking and gouging
- eating inedible objects.



WHY DOES MY CHILD HURT THEMSELVES?

Some reasons for self-injury include:

- **physical health issues**, e.g. pain, ear infections, reaction to medication, constipation, poor sleep (being tired makes coping with challenges harder)
- **genetic pre-disposition**. Some genetic syndromes can make a person more likely to hurt themselves.
- **sensory sensitivities**. Self-injury can be used by a child to increase their level of arousal / alertness (e.g. touch, movement, sound) or to calm down when their sensory system is overloaded.
- **to get care from others**. Self-injury can make other people come to the child to help them, interact with them and to make them feel safe.
- **communication difficulties**. A child might hurt themselves when they feel frustrated because they can't communicate what they want or need or when they have difficulty understanding others.
- **escaping / avoiding activities**. Some children learn that self-injury can be used to avoid a task or activity, to leave a place, or to be left alone.
- **emotional state**. A child might hurt themselves when they feel anxiety or stress to release the tension. Self-injury can release hormones (called endorphins) in the brain which make the young person feel good.

HOW CAN I HELP?

Self-injury can have a big impact on the child, their family, paid carers and teaching staff - watching a child hurt themselves can be distressing and exhausting.

Get help early. Getting a child help early can stop self-injury becoming a habit for them.



First Steps:

- Organise a review of your child or young person's health – rule out or treat any underlying conditions causing pain or discomfort.
- See a Psychologist or Behaviour Support Practitioner for a Functional Behaviour Assessment to find out why your child is hurting themselves and how their needs can be met in other ways. They will develop a Behaviour Support Plan which will have strategies such as:
 - schedules and routines that are structured and predictable, to reduce confusion and provide comfort
 - interaction strategies that help with sharing information with the child
 - teaching the child skills that give them ways of meeting their needs more independently
 - teaching the child ways to soothe and calm themselves when they are upset (e.g., relaxation techniques, deep breathing), or to stay alert when they feel tired (e.g., physical activity)
 - planning for when your child might experience sensory challenges, e.g., taking noise-cancelling headphones if going somewhere loud
 - response strategies that describe how everyone needs to respond when the self-injury happens, so everyone responds in the same way
 - rewarding your child for positive behaviours
 - reassurance and support to reduce anxiety and worry
 - calm and 'tuned in' caregiving without over-responding to the self-injury.

CAN MEDICATION HELP?

Every child is different. For some, medication can be helpful, particularly when used in combination with Positive Behaviour Support. Speak to your GP, Paediatrician or Paediatric Psychiatrist about whether medication might help your child or young person.

CAN PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT HELP?

Sometimes protective equipment such as helmets, clothing, padding or restraints are used to stop a child getting hurt. These devices are usually prescribed by occupational therapists, in discussion with other professionals.

When thinking about protective equipment, consider:

- Restraints and protective devices do not address the **cause** of the behaviour, so are best used short-term.
- The child might find other ways to self-injure while wearing the protection.
- The child is unlikely to develop different strategies or skills to manage their feelings while using the device.
- Protective devices usually restrict a child's movement and can limit participation in activities, including activities they enjoy.
- Current legislation requires that some services get approval to use protective devices. *National Disability Insurance Scheme (Restrictive Practices and Behaviour Support) Rules 2018*

WHEN & WHERE TO GET MORE HELP:

- It is important to think about the different services that can help your child, you and your family.
- Opportunities to explore emotions and take a break can be very helpful.
- Think about seeing a counsellor for yourself and/or other family members experiencing stress.
- A service that can take care of your child for a short time (respite care / flexible support) can help your family take a break and rest.

If it feels difficult to trust someone else with the safety of your child, get to know the service first, and work with your network of supports to help you have a break.

Also, ask if your Behaviour Support Practitioner or Psychologist can train the service before your child's stay.

If you have any feedback on this tip sheet please fill in our [feedback form](#). You can find readings, resources and links related to this topic on our [webpage](#).

If you are still concerned, contact your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be helpful.

